

Teddy C. Anthappai,
Assistant Professor, Department of English,
St Berchmans College,
Changanacherry, Kerala, India.
tedthomask@gmail.com

An Apology for Autobiography

Abstract: Autobiography is one of the most popular and powerful media of self-expression and all sorts of persons, from a president to a pedlar, are rushing into print with their lives. This craze is symptomatic of man's need to unburden his heart and share his experiences with others (Sinha 2). At the same time, there has been a growing suspicion against the legitimacy of the genre and there is an increasing tendency to erase the centred presence and inscribed intention of the author from the text. Paul de Man, an ardent critic of the genre of autobiography, confuses its boundary with fiction and interrogates the autobiographical theory and praxis by calling it an enterprise in prosopopoeia—face-making. This paper attempts to underline the reputation of the genre on some sound principles based on erstwhile and current autobiographical practices.

Keywords: Personal narrative, intentionality, prosopopoeia, propaganda

Introduction: The German historian, Wilhelm Dilthey writes in *Meaning in History*, "Autobiography is the highest and most instructive form in which the understanding of life comes before us" (85-86). The author of an autobiography, by way of introspection and retrospection, recollects his intensely lived life and re-lives it to find meaning and purpose in the present. While in most other forms of writings one tries to explore the outer world,

autobiography leads one to self-discovery. Everyone, at some point in life, may feel an autobiographical impulse to inscribe his/her self in something but not everyone does it. Graham Greene says, "Sometimes, I wonder how all those who do not write, compose or paint can manage to escape the madness, the melancholia, the panic fear which is inherent in the human situation" (9). While some attempt to bring about a cathartic effect by re-living the anguish and agony of their unsolved past, others try to unburden their hearts by revealing their pent-up wishes and guarded desires as seen in the autobiographies of St Augustine and Rousseau.

Every autobiography includes the unique experiences of the author-self which he/she chooses to put down, using a linguistic medium and confessional mode. The meaning he/she wants to convey is woven into the fabric of the text with certain narrative devices and figurative tropes. While autobiography is the most widely used and most generally understood term for life narrative, it is also a term that has been vigorously challenged in the wake of postmodern and postcolonial critiques of the Enlightenment subject (Smith and Watson 3).

Autobiography vs. Critical Theory

Autobiography was formally born in the west pursuing the footprints of Humanism (340), says Lejeune. The Romantic Movement supplied an emotional edge to the humanistic agenda that had been assailed long by Cartesian dualism that placed mind and its reasoning capacity over every other thing. Mary Klages points out, "The Romantic strand of humanism, in particular, held that the author is the origin of the text, its creator and hence the starting point, the progenitor of the text" (49). Linda Anderson comments that the "autobiographical form gets drawn seamlessly into supporting the beliefs and values of an essentialist or Romantic notion of selfhood" (5). Autobiography, by its very nature, presumes the author's presence in the text as its *raison d'être* and the text assumes significance only in relation to his/her life.

Laura Marcus, a notable critic of autobiography, has observed that the concept of intention has persistently threaded its way through discussions of autobiography (3).

From New Criticism to Deconstruction, theorists have defied the notion of authorial dominance and semantic singularity. The New Critics held intentionality as a fallacy and declared that the meaning of a text is to be sought within it, in its linguistic and stylistic codes rather than in the authorial or historical considerations. W.K. Wimsatt and M C Beardsley, who formulated The Intentional Fallacy in *The Verbal Icon*, argues that “the design or intention of the author is neither available nor desirable as a standard for judging the success of a work of literary art” (470). According to T.S. Eliot’s Impersonality Theory of Art, author is not a creator but is merely a catalyst for the work to evolve or a medium where words and ideas merge. With the entry of structuralism and post-structuralism in the critical arena, literature began to be seen as a purely linguistic artefact. Foucault says, “Writing . . . is a voluntary obliteration of the self that does not require representation in books because it takes place in the everyday existence of the writer” (117).

Paul de Man, in his essay “Autobiography as De-Facement” published in 1979, opines, “Autobiography always looks slightly disreputable and self-indulgent in the company of the major genres—the novel, poetry and drama—never quite attaining aesthetic dignity” (919). De Man argues that autobiography is essentially rhetorical in nature where the trope employed is prosopopoeia, a Greek term meaning face/image-making. Smith and Watson, in *Reading Autobiography*, remark, “In autobiographical narratives, imaginative acts of remembering always intersect with such rhetorical acts as assertion, justification, judgment, conviction, and interrogation. That is, life narrators address readers whom they want to persuade to their version of experience” (6).

In Defence of Autobiography

John Sturrock writes, “Autobiography by its very nature does not lend itself completely and comfortably to the interpretive possibilities of the present literary theories” (3). It is sanctioned by a ‘Metaphysics of Presence’, a notion critiqued by Derrida at length in his deconstructive agenda. He remarks, “The theorist of autobiography takes on the inhumane role of Abbe de Condillac who took Rousseau’s autobiography that had been written as the anguished justification of life, as mere literature” (2). Rousseau, the author of *Confessions*, begs not to undermine his autobiography, written in blood and sweat, and pleads for understanding from his detractors. He writes, “I should like in some way to make my soul transparent to the reader’s eye, and for that purpose I am trying to present it from all points of view, to show it in all lights, and to contrive that none of its movements shall escape his notice, so that he may judge for himself the principle which has produced them” (169). A theorist, who reads one autobiography after another, practises the logic of induction and looks constantly to generalise his/her findings while the autobiographer solicits recognition as a singular being (Sturrock 3).

The New Critics argued that any preoccupation with the author leads one away from the work. This position holds true in the case of all literary genres except autobiography, since understanding the author and familiarity with his/her life are essential to substantiate the verisimilitude of the text. In the same vein, Eliot’s argument that writing is impersonal is also rejected, as every autobiography is a personal narrative wherein the ‘I’ is emphasised and brought to focus. To state that an autobiography is simply an extended exercise in image-making (*prosopopoeia*) is to banish the living author from the scene too radically. But the critic, in the attempt, inadvertently affirms the presence of the author, as the latter is found to construct an image of him/herself in the work which resuscitates him/her from a state of non-existence.

In psychoanalytic criticism, the author's subconscious and unconscious states have much to do with the meaning of the text and it follows that the author's intention could be retrieved from a literary text. It would be quite incongruous to think that the author's motives and wishes never enter the work. Critics such as E.D. Hirsch, Jr. "stressed that knowledge of the author's intention is necessary for determining a work's success; without that knowledge, he argued, it is impossible to determine whether the work satisfied the original intention" (Intentionality par.2). If there is no intentionality, there is no autobiography. Though all other works could be brought under the purview of the fallacy of intentionality, autobiography eludes its grip.

To call autobiography as mere fiction is to devalue its merits and underestimate the candour of a confessing soul. As Barrett Mandel says, "Every reader knows that autobiographies and novels are finally totally distinct" (54). One must accept that even scientific and theoretical works are often hypothetical, bound to be at least partly fictitious, as shown by Thomas Kuhn in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Moreover, one could even argue that every piece of writing, whether factual or fictitious, is invariably autobiographical in nature. Factual writing, albeit it seems objective, brings out the mental dispositions and intellectual preoccupations of the author which may construct, for some time, a paradigm which will be altered in due course when the time is ripe for a paradigm shift.

If literature is considered a social or cultural product reflective of the society it represents, as held by Marxism, autobiography too constitutes literature as it reveals various dimensions of society, although they are presented invariably in relation to the life of the author. Poetvin points out that life narrative is a social phenomenon, much more than a literary event: a socio-cultural action in the form of a literary performance. "Autobiographies . . . may reveal as much about the author's assumed audience as they do about him or her, and this is a

further reason why they need to be read as cultural documents, not just as personal ones,” observes Robert F. Sayre (qtd. in Smith and Watson 151).

Marginal Autobiography

Critical theory, with its anti-intentionality categories, seems to threaten and invalidate even the little space claimed by marginal self-writings. The latter poses a definite challenge to the mainstream literary theories and questions the upper class/caste ideologies. These writings are obviously purposive and clearly designed to move the readers to think of affirmative action and radical changes in society. They oppose the aesthetic notion of ‘art for art’s sake’ and embrace the idea of ‘art for life’s sake’. In *Criteria of Negro Art*, Du Bois writes: “All art is propaganda and ever must be, despite the wailing of the purists. I stand in utter shamelessness and say that whatever art I have for writing has been used always for propaganda for gaining the right of Black folk to love and enjoy” (Andrews 51).

In fact, all autobiographies are propagandistic at the individual level but the autobiographies of the marginalized echo the concerns of their communities and become their mouthpiece, and this marks them distinct and different from the mainstream autobiographies. Sarankumar Limbale, a noted Dalit intellectual, remarks, “If Dalit literature is propagandistic, it is because it presents the Dalit writers’ anguish and their questions. The questions they pose are their own and those of their society. This literature has made a declaration for human values, hence is not neutral. Dalit writers cannot sever their relation with the intensely lived and felt experiences of life” (35). These autobiographers have added a definite social dimension to self-writings by bringing about a fusion of ‘I’ and ‘We’ and by relating the story of their communities together with their own individual lives. Hence, their writings cannot be branded as an exercise in individual face-making (*prosopopoeia*), for these writers are the

representatives of their communities. If these soulful outpourings are put to naught by citing post-structuralist propositions, it turns out to be yet another injustice done to them.

Nussbaum points out that there is a pressure to read all autobiographies in conformity with the dominant notions of a unified self based on the prescriptive approach to autobiography adopted by modern critics who derived their models from a few classic texts (4-5). The autobiographies of the marginalized, on the one hand, transgress the generic boundaries drawn by canonical autobiographies and on the other defy those theorists who allege that all autobiographies are marked by intentionality and image-making enterprise. Anderson states, "However, the writing of women, or perhaps of any subject who is deemed to be different, allows us to read back into genre, the heterogeneity or transgressiveness it tries to exclude" (11). Since autobiography foregrounds the life of the author, it is not any less literary, for it has almost everything seen in other pieces of literature—imaginative and figurative elements, fictional and non-fictional aspects and personal and cultural facets. The autobiographies of the marginalized are all the more literary as each text embarks upon a journey through a specific historical period and unravels the life of the given society that encompasses the lives of so many individuals living in a given space and time.

Conclusion

To conclude, we could say that self-writing/autobiography is the most natural form of writing in the sense that an individual knows his/her own life more/better than any other life. If literature is imitation, autobiography is more literary than any other piece of writing, as it is truly mimetic of life. Its definition abides by the Romantic theory of art where art is expressive of the author who is a keen observer and expositor of life. If anyone argues that autobiography is not rightly representational but ridden with imaginary elements, it is because the author is endowed with the freedom to select his/her idiom and use his/her

ingenuity which could transform the ordinary into something sublime and the mundane into something transcendent. Autobiography places an individual's life on a platform where it could be seen, understood and appreciated by others, for it is a kind of writing which, more than any other, dreams of suppressing the distance between the writer and the reader (Kumar 3).

Works Cited

- Anderson, Linda. *Autobiography*. Routledge, 2007.
- De Man, Paul. "Autobiography as De-Facement". *Modern Language Notes*, vol.94, 1979, pp. 919-930.
- Foucault, Michel. *Language, Counter-memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews by Michel Foucault*. Ed. Donald F. Bouchard. Trans. Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon. Cornell University Press, 1977.
- Greene, Graham. *Ways of Life: An Autobiography*. Vintage Books, 1999.
- "Intentionality". *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. www.britannica.com. Accessed 20 May 2018.
- Klages, Mary. *Literary Theory: A Guide for the Perplexed*. Continuum, 2007
- Kumar, Raj. *Dalit Personal Narratives: Reading Caste, Nation and Identity*. New Delhi:Orient Black Swan, 2011
- Mandel, Barrett. "Full of Life Now". *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical*. Ed. James Olney. Princeton University Press, 1982.
- Marcus, Laura. *Auto/biographical Discourses*, Manchester University Press, 1994.
- Rousseau, Jean Jacques. *The Confessions of Jean-Jacques Rousseau*. Trans. J. M. Cohen. Penguin, 1953.
- Sinha, R. C. P. *The Indian Autobiographies in English*. S. Chand & Company Ltd, 1973.
- Smith, Sidonie and Julia Watson. *Reading Autobiography*. University of Minnesota Press, 2001.
- Sturrock, John. *The Language of autobiography: Studies in the First Person Singular*. Cambridge University Press, 1993.
- Wimsatt, W. K. and M. C. Beardsley. "The Intentional Fallacy". *The Sewanee Review*. vol. 54, no. 3, 1946, pp. 468-488.